
Intellectual elitism and the need for faith in Maimonides and Aquinas

*Elitismo intelectual y la necesidad de la fe
según Maimónides y Tomás de Aquino*

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Abstract: In his *Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate* 3.1, Aquinas cites Maimonides as giving five reasons for the need for faith. Yet interpreters tend to see Aquinas as "standing Maimonides on his head". In this paper, the author places Maimonides' text (on the five reasons for concealing metaphysics) within the context of his rational mysticism and compares it to Aquinas' own Christian mystical thought in an attempt to show that in his own mind Aquinas is not misquoting, reversing, or doing violence to Maimonides' text; rather, Aquinas is completing Maimonides' natural, rational mysticism with what he understands to be the supernatural perfection of the theological virtue of faith.

Keywords: Aquinas, Maimonides, faith, elitism, religion, mysticism, metaphysics.

Resumen: En su *Comentario al De Trinitate de Boecio* 3.1, Tomás de Aquino cita a Maimónides, de quien afirma que presenta cinco razones a favor de la necesidad de la fe. Los intérpretes suelen ver a Tomás de Aquino como si "hubiera puesto a Maimónides de cabeza". En el presente artículo se retoma el texto de Maimónides (acerca de las cinco razones por las que la metafísica debe reservarse a los doctos y ocultarse a las masas), y se sitúa en el contexto de su misticismo racional. Comparándolo con el pensamiento místico cristiano de Tomás de Aquino, se muestra cómo éste no está citando erróneamente, ni invirtiendo ni violentando el texto de Maimónides; más bien, Tomás de Aquino complementa el misticismo natural y racional de Maimónides con lo que él concibe como la perfección sobrenatural de la virtud teológica de la fe.

Palabras clave: Tomás de Aquino, Maimónides, fe, elitismo, religión, misticismo, metafísica.

RECIBIDO: OCTUBRE DE 2014 / ACEPTADO: ENERO DE 2015

INTRODUCTION

In his *Super Boetium De Trinitate* 3.1, Aquinas gives five reasons for why it is necessary for humans to have religious faith.¹ Quite surprisingly, he confidently attributes these five reasons to Maimonides: “[I]t is necessary to have faith for five reasons, which Rabbi Moses posits.”² The Leonine editors cite Maimonides’ *Dux perplexorum* 1.33 as Aquinas’ source for these five reasons for the need for faith.³ Yet when one turns to this passage in Maimonides’ *The Guide for the Perplexed*, one immediately sees that he appears to be giving the same five reasons for what his interpreters⁴ commonly call his ‘intellectual elitism’, namely, the view that the study of metaphysics, which Maimonides considers to be the ultimate path to human perfection, must be restricted to the learned and must be hidden from the unlearned masses. Hence, this text of Maimonides is generally

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1. See also THOMAS AQUINAS, *In III Sent.* d. 24, a. 3, q. 3, sol. 1; *De veritate* q. 14, a. 10. Cf. P. SYNAVE, *La Révélation des vérités divines naturelles d’après Saint Thomas d’Aquin*, “Mélanges Mandonnet” vol. 1 (Vrin, Paris, 1930) 327-70; R. IMBACH, *Ut ait Rabbi Moyses: Maimonidesche Philosopheme bei Thomas von Aquin und Meister Eckhart*, “Collectanea Franciscana” 60 (1990) 105-6.
 2. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super Boetium De Trinitate* (henceforth, In BDT) q. 3, a. 1, co., in *Opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita*, t. 50: *Super Boetium De Trinitate* (Commissio Leonina-Editions Du Cerf, Roma-Paris, 1992): “[N]ecessarium est habere fidem propter quinque rationes, quas Rabbi Moyses ponit.” All translations of Aquinas’ texts are my own.
 3. See *Ibid.*
 4. See, for example, D. BLUMENTHAL, *Maimonides: Prayer, Worship, and Mysticism*, in R. Goetsche (ed.), *Prière, Mystique, et Judaïsme* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1987) 89-106; D. MCCALLUM, *Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed: Silence and Salvation* (Routledge, New York, 2007) Ch. 1; T. RUDAVSKY, *Maimonides* (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2010) Ch. 1. For an excellent account of Maimonides’ debt to his Arab predecessors that places a strong emphasis on the sources for his elitism and related views such as the interpretation of Scripture, see S. PESSIN, *The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides*, “The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy” Summer (2014), in E. N. ZALTA (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/maimonides-islamic/>. The notion of elitism in Maimonides is part of the much broader and more complex issue of esotericism in Maimonidean studies, which space constraints do not allow me to address here. For a good review of the literature on esotericism in Maimonides, see K. SEESKIN, *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York, 2000) Appendix: “Esotericism and the Limits of Knowledge: A Critique of Strauss.”

seen—and I would agree—as an expression of his intellectual elitism. But assuming that this elitism, so characteristic of Maimonides, is not present in Aquinas, many interpreters have been inclined to read Aquinas' text on the five reasons for the need for faith as at best a generous adaptation, and at worst a misappropriation or reversal, of Maimonides' thought. For example, Ernest Léonard Fortin believes Maimonides and Aquinas in their corresponding texts are giving five reasons for widely divergent positions.⁵ Bernard McGinn goes as far as saying that Aquinas is “standing Maimonides on his head,” in the sense that his use of Maimonides is as a reversal (albeit a “benign reversal”) of Maimonides' own thought.⁶

In this paper, however, I place Maimonides' text on the five reasons for concealing metaphysics within the context of his rational mysticism and compare it to Aquinas' own Christian mystical thought. I attempt to show that Aquinas is making a legitimate appropriation of Maimonides' own ‘five reasons’: he simply tones down Maimonides' strict elitism (adopting a more moderate sort

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5. E. L. FORTIN, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-political Problem* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 1996) 153: “Equally revealing from the same point of view is the fact that the reasons which Maimonides had invoked to justify the concealing of philosophic truths from the multitude could be used by Aquinas to show instead why, in addition to supernatural truths, God has seen fit to reveal certain natural truths or truths that are accessible to human reason and experience alone.”
 6. B. MCGINN, *Sapientia Judaeorum: The Role of Jewish Philosophers in Some Scholastic Thinkers*, in R. J. BAST, A. C. GOW (eds.), *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History: Essays Presented to Heiko A. Oberman on His 70th Birthday* (Brill, Leiden, 2000) 206-228, at 218: “Thomas frequently disagrees with Maimonides, though always with respect. Even more revealing is the fact that when he agrees with Maimonides he often does so within the context of making a point that “stands Maimonides on his head,” so to speak. In a brief presentation I can do no more than to give one example of each procedure, starting with the “benign reversal” appropriation. In *Guide* 1.33-34 Maimonides discussed why the truths of divine science are hidden under the parables of the Torah.... Maimonides goes on to spell out five reasons for this... Maimonides' point is to underlie the esotericism of divine science.... Thomas Aquinas quotes Maimonides' five reasons three times in the course of his writings, but to quite a different effect.... Aquinas emphasizes that [natural truths] are taught by faith precisely in order to make them accessible to all, as far as possible, rather than as a means of restricting them to an intellectual elite.... So the reasons that Maimonides sees for restricting truth to the few are adapted by Thomas Aquinas as arguments for the fittingness of revealing truth to all.”

of elitism) and emphasizes the need for the faith. In his own mind Aquinas is not misquoting, reversing, or doing violence to Maimonides' text as much as completing it with what he views as the supernatural perfection of the theological virtue of faith.

My paper will be divided into two sections. First (I), I shall present Maimonides' 'five reasons' for concealing metaphysics from common people in context in order to show that they are also reasons for why faith in some of the conclusions of metaphysics is necessary for common people. Then (II), I shall turn to the text in Aquinas where he cites Maimonides' 'five reasons'. This section will be divided into three parts: (A) I shall review the epistemological presuppositions that Aquinas discusses before citing Maimonides; (B) I shall present Aquinas text on the 'five reasons' in its ethical-mystical context; and (C) I shall discuss the theological conclusion which Aquinas draws at the end of the text in order to show how he believes he is completing Maimonides' thought with a supernatural perspective of the faith.

I. MAIMONIDES' STRICT INTELLECTUAL ELITISM AND THE NEED FOR FAITH

It is well known that in the first book of his *Guide for the Perplexed* Maimonides conceives metaphysics not only as the highest science—a common view within the Aristotelian tradition—but also as the highest mystical path to God and hence the ultimate human perfection. The practitioner of Maimonides' rational mysticism aims to attain an understanding of what others conceive only through the metaphorical language of religion:

When a man attains to perfection, and arrives at a knowledge of the 'secrets of the Law', either through the assistance of a teacher or by self-instruction, being led by the understanding of one part to the study of the other, he will belong to those who faithfully believe in the true principles, either because of conclusive proof, where proof is possible, or by forcible arguments, where argument is admissible; he will have a true no-

tion of those things which he previously received in similes and metaphors, and he will fully understand their sense.⁷

This path requires much preparation and perseverance, for those who aspire to the mystical perfection of the metaphysician must traverse a long course of preparatory studies, which culminates in metaphysics only at the end of their lives: “[H]e who wishes to attain to human perfection, must therefore first study logic, next the various branches of mathematics in their proper order, then physics, and lastly metaphysics.”⁸ Maimonides then explains at some length why each discipline is necessary as a preamble to the study of metaphysics. Most people will be wearied by the length of the process, and will not wish to undergo the process. Even among those who begin it, most do not persevere. Yet this is the only way to reach the goal: “The preparatory studies are of long duration, and man, in his natural desire to reach the goal, finds them frequently too wearisome, and does not wish to be troubled by them....”⁹ Therefore, common people are not fit for Maimonides’ rational mysticism. In fact, for most people, attempting to take this path will result in infidelity:

He, however, who begins with metaphysics, will not only become confused in matters of religion, but will fall into complete infidelity. I compare such a person to an infant fed with wheaten bread, meat and wine; it will undoubtedly die, not because such food is naturally unfit for the human body, but because of the weakness of the child, who is unable to digest the food, and cannot derive benefit from it. The same is the case with the true principles of science. They were presented in enigmas, clad in riddles, and taught by wise men in the most mysterious way that could be devised, not because they contain

7. MAIMONIDES, *Guide for the Perplexed* (henceforth, *GP*) 1.33, in M. FRIEDLANDER (trans.), *The Guide for the Perplexed by Moses Maimonides*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, London, 1904).

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

some secret evil, or are contrary to the fundamental principles of the Law (as fools think who are only philosophers in their own eyes), but because of the incapacity of man to comprehend them at the beginning of his studies: only slight allusions have been made to them to serve for the guidance of those who are capable of understanding them....¹⁰

This rational mystical path, then, is couched in what I would call a strict intellectual elitism, the view that human perfection and union with God is reserved exclusively to an intellectual elite; that only a privileged few may be granted mystical access to God through an arduous process of learning the sciences, a process that culminates in metaphysics: "As regards the privileged few, 'the remnant whom the Lord calls' (Joel 3.5), they only attain the perfection at which they aim after due preparatory labor."¹¹ Maimonides will go to great lengths to argue that his rational-mystical path should not be taught to the common people, or even to beginners in the path, devoting two chapters of his to this task. The idea is mentioned explicitly at least seven times throughout the course of the two chapters.

- (1) [I]t is very injurious to begin with this branch of philosophy, viz., Metaphysics....¹²
- (2) [I]t is necessary to initiate the young and to instruct the less intelligent according to their comprehension: those who appear to be talented and to have capacity for the higher method of study, i.e., that based on proof and on true logical argument, should be gradually advanced towards perfection, either by tuition or by self-instruction....¹³
- (3) He, however, who begins with metaphysics, will not only become confused in matters of religion, but will fall into complete infidelity....¹⁴

10. *Ibid.*

11. *GP* 1.34.

12. *GP* 1.33.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

- (4) We have frequently mentioned in this treatise the principle of our Sages ‘not to discuss the *Ma’aseh Mercabah* even in the presence of one pupil, except he be wise and intelligent; and then only the headings of the chapters are to be given to him.’ We must, therefore, begin with teaching these subjects according to the capacity of the pupil, and on two conditions, first, that he be wise, i.e., that he should have successfully gone through the preliminary studies, and secondly that he be intelligent, talented, clear-headed, and of quick perception, that is, ‘have a mind of his own’ (*mebin midda’ato*), as our Sages termed it.¹⁵
- (5) [I]nstruction should not begin with metaphysics, but should at first be restricted to pointing out what is fitted for notice and what may be made manifest to the multitude....¹⁶
- (6) As regards the privileged few, ‘the remnant whom the Lord calls’ (Joel 3.5), they only attain the perfection at which they aim after due preparatory labor. The necessity of such a preparation and the need of such a training for the acquisition of real knowledge, has been plainly stated by King Solomon in the following words: ‘If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: and it is profitable to prepare for wisdom’ (Eccles. 10.10): ‘Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end’ (Prov. 19. 20).¹⁷
- (7) For these reasons it was proper that the study of metaphysics should have been exclusively cultivated by privileged persons, and not entrusted to the common people. It is not for the beginner, and he should abstain from it, as the little child has to abstain from taking solid food and from carrying heavy weights.¹⁸

15. *Ibid.*

16. *GP* 1.34.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

It is within this context that Maimonides gives the ‘five reasons’ why metaphysics ought to be hidden from the common people—and which Aquinas will later cite as being reasons for the need for faith. The five reasons occupy the entirety of Ch. 34 of Book 1 (and for reasons of space I shall not reproduce them), but they can be summarized as follows: (1) The subject itself of metaphysics is too difficult, subtle, and profound for the common people; (2) the intelligence of pupils is at first insufficient for understanding it; (3) the preparatory studies are of long duration and few persevere; (4) the physical constitution of particular human beings is an obstacle (some are too young, others too passionate, etc.); and (5) most people are disturbed from intellectual occupations by their human needs. That these are reasons for hiding metaphysics from common people is clear from the text that precedes the chapter on the five reasons:

I will now proceed to explain the reasons why we should not instruct the multitude in pure metaphysics, or begin with describing to them the true essence of things, or with showing them that a thing must be as it is, and cannot be otherwise. This will form the subject of the next chapter....¹⁹

Then he immediately opens the chapter on the five reasons saying: “There are five reasons why instruction should not begin with metaphysics, but should at first be restricted to pointing out what is fitted for notice and what may be made manifest to the multitude....”²⁰ He also concludes the chapter recalling the purpose.

Now, given this context, we can ask: Is it fair to say that Aquinas, in citing these as reasons why faith is necessary, is misappropriating Maimonides’ thought, or “standing Maimonides on his head,”²¹ or that his citation of Maimonides involves a reversal of Maimonides’ thought? It would definitely be a misappropriation or even a reversal if Maimonides were merely trying to argue here that metaphysics

19. *GP* 1.33.

20. *GP* 1.34.

21. Cf. B. MCGINN, *Sapientia Judaeorum*, 218.

must be hidden from the common people. But he is actually going further than that. He is also arguing that it is necessary for the common people to have non-rational access to some of those metaphysical truths which lie at the end the rational path. Granted that this is not the emphasis in Chs. 33 and 34 of Book 1, it is nonetheless mentioned in passing at least a few times. For example, he says that without belief in God's existence and incorporeality, only very few people would ever come to know these things, for few engage in the process of learning, and even fewer people persevere, the effect being that most people would die without knowing of God at all:

Now, if no knowledge whatever had been given to us by means of tradition, and if we had not been brought to the belief in a thing through the medium of similes, we would have been bound to form a perfect notion of things with their essential characteristics, and to believe only what we could prove: a goal which could only be attained by long preparation. In such a case most people would die, without having known whether there was a God or not, much less that certain things must be asserted about Him, and other things denied as defects. From such a fate not even "one of a city or two of a family" (Jer. 3:14) would have escaped.²²

In fact, for that very purpose was the Torah written, so that common people, for whom the path of metaphysics amounts to infidelity, can have access through faith to those truths that they need to believe:

[I]t is the object of the Torah to serve as a guide for the instruction of the young, of women, and of the common people; and as all of them are incapable of comprehending the true sense of the words, tradition was considered sufficient to convey all truths which were to be established.²³

22. *GP* 1.34.

23. *GP* 1.33.

Thus Maimonides may not be emphatic in these two chapters on the need for faith, but he clearly does have the issue in mind.

Now, if we turn to the following chapter, Ch. 35, we in fact see a shift in emphasis. Now Maimonides focuses directly on the need for faith for common people. He insists that some basic doctrines about God and his relation to creation ought not to be hidden from the common people, but should be taught to them to the extent of their capacity.

[I]n the same way as all people must be informed, and even children must be trained in the belief that God is One, and that none besides Him is to be worshipped, so must all be taught by simple authority that God is incorporeal... (a long list of divine attributes follows). This suffices for the guidance of children and of ordinary persons who must believe.... But the question concerning the attributes of God, their inadmissibility...; concerning the Creation, His Providence...; all these things are very difficult problems, the true 'Secrets of the Law'... the subjects of which we should only mention the headings of the chapters... and only in the presence of a person satisfying the above-named conditions.²⁴

He also insists that unintelligent people must be told that God is one and incorporeal, and that He alone is to be worshipped:

That God is incorporeal, that He cannot be compared with His creatures, that He is not subject to external influence; these are things which must be explained to every one according to his capacity, and they must be taught by way of tradition to children and women, to the stupid and ignorant, as they are taught that God is One, that He is eternal, and that He alone is to be worshipped.... When persons have received this doctrine, and have been trained in this belief... the writings of the Prophets... must be made clear and explained to them.... Their

24. *GP* 1.35.

belief in the unity of God and in the words of the Prophets will then be a true and perfect belief. Those who are not sufficiently intelligent to comprehend the true interpretation of these passages in the Bible, or to understand that the same term admits of two different interpretations, may simply be told that the scriptural passage is clearly understood by the wise, but that they should content themselves with knowing that God is incorporeal (etc.).... This may suffice for that class of persons, and it is not proper to leave them in the belief that God is corporeal, or that He has any of the properties of material objects, just as there is no need to leave them in the belief that God does not exist, that there are more Gods than one, or that any other being may be worshipped.²⁵

Thus if we interpret the chapter on the “five reasons” in context—as Aquinas surely did—we clearly see that Maimonides designed it as a defense of his intellectual elitism (and hence his rational mysticism), and that in the process he nuances this understanding by mentioning the need for faith for common people and beginners in the rational path. The emphasis is clearly on his intellectual elitism, but the theme of the need for faith nonetheless emerges as a secondary, though closely related, point, which he discusses more fully in Ch. 35. It is perhaps this secondary emphasis which interpreters such as Fortin and McGinn have not seen or acknowledged.

But what about the legitimacy of Aquinas’ use of Maimonides for his own purposes? Assuming that Aquinas does not hold to an elitism of the sort that Maimonides defends, is his appropriation of Maimonides’ five reasons legitimate? Now I shall move on to consider how Aquinas appropriates Maimonides’ ‘five reasons’ by arguing that he indeed tones down, but does not deny altogether, Maimonides’ elitism, and places the main emphasis of his discussion on the need for faith.

25. *Ibid.*

II. AQUINAS' MODERATE ELITISM AND THE NEED FOR FAITH

In his *Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate*, Aquinas asks whether faith is necessary for humankind. The gist of the response will be that although some 'divine things' (*divina*) can be known scientifically (*scita*) by a few people dedicated to the sciences, there are nonetheless some doctrines such as the Trinity that cannot be known at all without faith. Therefore, everyone will need faith: common people on account of both types of truth, and the learned on account of the kind of truth that can only be known by faith.

Yet what interests us here the most is how Aquinas gets to this conclusion. In explaining how most people have access to truths of the latter kind, namely to those that can be known scientifically only by some, he rests on Maimonides' text discussed above, attributing to him five reasons why it is necessary for common people to have faith in some of the truths of metaphysics: "[I]t is necessary to have faith for five reasons, which Rabbi Moses posits."²⁶ Then he utilizes this philosophical discussion to reach the properly theological conclusion that analogously everyone, even the trained metaphysician, needs to have faith in revealed doctrines, for they cannot be known otherwise. But his argument for the need for faith is far more complex than that of Maimonides, and involves a discussion of (A) basic epistemological presuppositions, (B) their applications to Aquinas' religious ethics, and (C) to Aquinas' theology.

A. Epistemological presuppositions

Aquinas begins the body of his lengthy response by offering an epistemological analysis of the concept of faith in general—as applicable to both human and religious faith. He follows Hugh of St. Victor in arguing that faith is epistemologically midway between knowledge (*scientia*) and understanding (*intellectus*) on the one hand, and opinion (*opinio*) on the other: for all faith is in some way a 'fixed assent' without fear of the opposite being true, and this it has in common

26. In *BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co., quoted above in note 2.

with knowledge; whereas at the same time it concerns those things that are not accessible to our understanding, and this it has in common with opinion:

[F]aith has something in common with opinion, and something in common with knowledge and understanding, by reason of which it holds a position midway between opinion and understanding or science, according to Hugh of St. Victor. In common with understanding and knowledge, it possesses certain and fixed assent; and in this it differs from opinion, which accepts one of two opposites, though with fear that the other may be true, and on account of this doubt it fluctuates between two contraries. But, in common with opinion, faith is concerned with things that are not naturally accessible to our understanding, and in this respect it differs from science and understanding.²⁷

After giving a brief account of the social need for human faith in contingent matters such as history, Aquinas moves on to discuss the intelligibility of ‘divine and necessary’ (i.e., metaphysical) truths and our ability to know them. He explains that there is an order to our knowledge:

The truth of things may also not be evident because of defect on our part, as in the case of divine and necessary things which, according to their own nature, are most knowable. Therefore, to understand them, we are not capable of immediate intellec-

27. In *BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co.: “Dicendum quod fides habet aliquid commune cum opinione et aliquid cum scientia et intellectu, ratione cuius ponitur media inter scientiam et opinionem ab Hugone de sancto Victore. Cum scientia siquidem et intellectu commune habet certum et fixum assensum, in quo ab opinione differt, quae accipit alterum contrariorum cum formidine alterius, et a dubitatione quae fluctuat inter duo contraria. Sed cum opinione commune habet quod est de rebus quae non sunt intellectui pervia, in quo differt a scientia et intellectu.” Cf. *Summa theologiae* (henceforth *ST*), II-II, q. 2, a. 1, in *Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita*, t. 8-10: *Secunda secundae Summae theologiae* (Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, Romae, 1895-1897-1899).

tion, from the very beginning, since it is in accordance with our nature to attain from things less knowable and posterior in themselves, to knowledge of those that are themselves more knowable and prior.²⁸

Aquinas is here relying on the Aristotelian epistemological principle, taken from *Physics* 1, that in order to acquire knowledge we must proceed from what is better known to us (though less intelligible in itself) to what is less known to us (though more intelligible in itself).²⁹ As can be seen from the context of the article, by ‘those things that are better known to us’ Aquinas means sensible knowledge of natural reality, whereas when he says ‘those things that are less known to us but more intelligible in themselves’ he is thinking of the conclusions of metaphysics, especially truths about God, His existence and His nature. Speaking of ‘divine things’ (*divina*), he states that: “It is possible for humans to come to the full knowledge of certain of these things by way of reason even in the state of this life.... [S]cientific knowledge (*scientia*) can be had of these, and is had by some....”³⁰ Yet the process that one must engage in in order to reach knowledge of these things is arduous, as it involves an entire curriculum of studies that begins with many preambles and culminates in the study of metaphysics. Here Aquinas is clearly following Maimonides without citing him. Elsewhere he says more explicitly that students should first start with logic, then mathematics, then natural philosophy, then moral philosophy, and finally divine science—an order that closely resembles that laid out by Maimonides, the only exception being the addition of moral philosophy

28. *In BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co.: “Ex defectu vero nostro sunt non apparentia res divinae et necessariae, quae sunt secundum naturam maxime notae. Unde ad harum inspectionem non sumus statim a principio idonei, cum oporteat nos ex minus notis et posterioribus secundum naturam in magis nota et priora naturaliter pervenire.”

29. Cf. *In Phys.*, L. 1, lect. 1, nos. 6-7, in *Opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII. P. M. edita, t. 2: Commentaria in octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis* (Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, Romae, 1884).

30. *In BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co.: “Ad quorum quaedam plene cognoscenda possibile est homini pervenire per viam rationis etiam in statu huius vitae.... [P]ossit haberi scientia et a quibusdam habeatur....”

to the list.³¹ Divine science, namely, metaphysics, which “considers the first causes of things,” is the crowning of the process of human learning, and thus lies at the end of the path. For this reason—Aquinas says—philosophers saw it appropriate to leave the study of this science to the last period of their lives.

Now, what is novel here is that Aquinas complements this doctrine with an important nuance: he adds that the knowledge of divine (or metaphysical) realities, which are less known to us and more intelligible in themselves—and hence last known by us—can shed important light on the immediate, sensible reality which we know first. Therefore, Aquinas argues, it is convenient to have some knowledge of those divine and necessary truths even at the beginning of the process.

But since those things that we learn first (*quae primo cognoscimus*) are known (*sunt nota*) by virtue of those things that we learn last (*quae ultimo cognoscimus*), it is necessary for us even from the beginning to be acquainted (*habere notitiam*) with those things that are most known.³²

This is where the need for faith comes in. Beginners in the process of learning can benefit even at this stage from having some awareness of what comes last in the process, yet scientifically they cannot ‘skip’ to the end of the process; at this stage they cannot yet scientifically

31. Cf. *In Librum de causis*, proem., n. 3, in H. D. SAFFREY (ed.), *Super librum De Causis exposition* (Société Philosophique-Nauwelaerts, Fribourg-Louvain, 1954): “Et inde est quod philosophorum intentio ad hoc principaliter erat ut, per omnia quae in rebus considerabant, ad cognitionem primarum causarum pervenirent. Unde scientiam de primis causis ultimo ordinabant, cuius considerationi ultimum tempus suae vitae deputarent: primo quidem incipientes a logica quae modum scientiarum tradit, secundo procedentes ad mathematicam cuius etiam pueri possunt esse capaces, tertio ad naturalem philosophiam quae propter experientiam tempore indiget, quarto autem ad moralem philosophiam cuius iuvenis esse conveniens auditor non potest, ultimo autem scientiae divinae insistebant quae considerat primas entium causas.”

32. *In BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co.: “Sed quia ex vi illorum, quae ultimo cognoscimus, sunt nota illa quae primo cognoscimus, oportet etiam a principio aliquam nos habere notitiam de illis quae sunt per se magis nota....”

know those things that are known last, without first going through the entire learning process. Thus, at the beginner stage, pupils can have access to these ‘divine and necessary’ truths only through faith. As Aquinas pithily states, this “can only happen by believing.”³³

As though assuring us that this should not be surprising, Aquinas points out that this same phenomenon occurs in the case of the sciences, which are learned according to the order described above. Those who are at the beginning of the process of learning, who are studying the preambles to metaphysics (i.e., Logic, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, etc.), are required to suppose certain metaphysical truths in order to be able to advance in their studies:

And this is evident even in the order of the sciences; since that science which is concerned with highest causes, namely, metaphysics, comes last in human knowledge; yet in sciences that are preambles to it there must be supposed certain truths which only in it are more fully revealed; therefore every science has some suppositions that must be believed in order to carry on the process of learning.³⁴

B. Applications to Aquinas’ religious ethics

At this point in the discussion Aquinas brings out the ethical and mystical implications of the epistemological doctrine he has reviewed thus far. He reminds the reader that the end of human life is beatitude, which he says consists in the full knowledge of divine (i.e., metaphysical) realities. But human beings must have awareness of their end in order for them to direct their actions towards that end—a claim consistent with the Aristotelian dictum that what is last in the order of execution (the end) comes first in the order of

33. *Ibid.*: “quod fieri non potest nisi credendo.”

34. *In BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co.: “Et etiam hoc patet in ordine scientiarum, quia scientia quae est de causis altissimis, scilicet metaphysica, ultimo occurrit homini ad cognoscendum, et tamen in scientiis praeambulis oportet quod supponantur quaedam quae in illa plenius innotescunt; unde quaelibet scientia habet suppositiones, quibus oportet addiscentem credere.”

intention.³⁵ It follows, then, that in order for humans to direct their actions towards beatitude they must have some awareness of this beatitude from the outset. Faith is what makes this possible. Even though certain truths relating to beatitude are knowable through reason, these are not knowable by the majority of humans, and especially not at the outset. He makes this explicit in a text I partially quoted above:

Since, therefore, the end of human life is beatitude, which consists in the full cognition of divine things, in order that human life be directed to beatitude it is necessary immediately from the beginning to have faith in those divine things which are expected to be fully known in the ultimate [state of] human perfection. It is possible for humans to come to the full knowledge of certain of these things by way of reason even in the state of this life. And although scientific knowledge (*scientia*) can be had of these, and is had by some, nevertheless having faith [in them] is necessary for five reasons, which Rabbi Moses gives.³⁶

Aquinas, then, is presenting the need for faith in naturally-knowable divine truths in ethical-mystical terms. Faith in the conclusions of metaphysics is necessary for human beings because it is the only way in which they can know these divine things at the outset, which is a prerequisite for directing their actions towards that end.

And it is in this context that Aquinas introduces Maimonides' 'five reasons'. The list of reasons given by Aquinas is in fact a rather accurate paraphrase of Maimonides' much longer text; yet he will complement each of the five reasons with a comment on how it implies that faith is necessary for attaining human beatitude. The first reason is taken almost verbatim from Maimonides: (1) metaphysics

35. Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1.

36. *In BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co.: "Cum ergo finis humanae vitae sit beatitudo, quae consistit in plena cognitione divinorum, necessarium est ad humanam vitam in beatitudinem dirigendam statim a principio habere fidem divinorum, quae plene cognoscenda expectantur in ultima perfectione humana. Ad quorum quaedam plene cognoscenda possibile est homini pervenire per viam ratio."

is too profound and subtle for most humans. Aquinas here simply adds that this difficulty results in divine (metaphysical) truths being hidden from most people, but that faith resolves this problem by making the knowledge of these things accessible to all.

[Faith is necessary] first, on account of the depth and subtlety of the matter, by which divine things are hidden from human understanding. Therefore, lest any man be without some knowledge of them, provision is made that through faith, at least, he know divine truths. Therefore, in Eccles. 7:25 it is said: “It is a great depth, who shall find it out?”³⁷

Aquinas’ second reason is also exactly as it is found in Maimonides: (2) the weakness of young minds. Yet Aquinas adds that, as a result of their weakness, faith is necessary to them, so that even at their early age they may have access to these important truths, and thus may order their lives towards beatitude:

Secondly, on account of the weakness of the human intellect from the beginning. For perfection of knowledge does not belong to the human intellect except at the end; therefore, that it should at no time lack a knowledge of God, it requires faith by which it may accept divine truths from the very beginning.³⁸

Aquinas paraphrases Maimonides’ third reason by saying that knowing God by reason requires knowledge of too many “preambles”³⁹ (Maimonides had spoken of “preparatory studies” as being of “long duration”). St. Thomas adds that since few would be able to com-

37. *Ibid.*: “[N]ecessarium est habere fidem propter quinque rationes, quas Rabbi Moyses ponit. Prima scilicet propter profunditatem et subtilitatem materiae, per quam occultantur divina ab hominum intellectu. Unde ne sit homo sine eorum qualicumque cognitione, provisum est ei ut saltem per fidem divina cognoscat, Eccl. 7: alta profunditas, quis cognoscet illam?”

38. *Ibid.*: “Secunda propter imbecillitatem intellectus humani a principio. Non enim provenit ei sua perfectio nisi in fine; et ideo ut nullum tempus sit ei vacuum a divina cognitione, indiget fide, per quam ab ipso principio divina accipiat.”

39. Cf. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1.

prehend all these sciences, faith in the conclusions of metaphysics is necessary so that all may have knowledge of divine (metaphysical) realities and thus may seek beatitude:

Thirdly, because of the many preambles that are required for a knowledge of God according to reason. For this there is needed knowledge of almost all the sciences, since cognition of divine things is the end of them all. But few indeed would comprehend these preambulatory truths or investigate them completely. Therefore, lest large numbers of men should be left without knowledge of divine things, the way of faith has been provided by God Himself.⁴⁰

The fourth and fifth reasons are essentially the same as those given by Maimonides—some are unfit for metaphysics, others are too busy—and from these reasons he infers that faith is necessary so that all may have knowledge of divine metaphysical realities for the purpose of ordering their lives towards beatitude:

In the fourth place, many men on account of their natural constitution are unfitted for perfect intellectual investigation according to reason; therefore, that these might not lack knowledge of divine things, the way of faith has been provided. In the fifth place, because of numerous occupations with which men are busied, it would be impossible for all of them to discover, by way of reason, necessary truth in regard to God, and on this account the way of faith has been established, both as regards things that might in some way be known and as regards those that required revelation in order that they be believed.⁴¹

40. *In BDT* q. 3, a. 1, co.: “Tertio propter multa praeambula, quae exiguntur ad habendam cognitionem de Deo secundum viam rationis. Requiritur enim ad hoc fere omnium scientiarum cognitio, cum omnium finis sit cognitio divinorum; quae quidem praeambula paucissimi consequuntur. Unde ne multitudo hominum a divina cognitione vacua remaneret, provisa est ei divinitus via fidei.”

41. *Ibid.*: “Quinto propter occupationes plurimas, quibus oportet homines occupari; unde impossibile est quod omnes consequantur per viam rationis illud quod est de Deo necessarium ad cognoscendum, et propter hoc est via fidei procurata, et hoc quantum ad illa quae sunt ab aliquibus scita et aliis proponuntur ut credenda.”

Thus, we see that Aquinas reproduces Maimonides' list of reasons why metaphysics is beyond the reach of most people, but rather than seeing the need for faith for common people as a secondary point, he reads it into the five reasons themselves. The end result is that Aquinas is toning down Maimonides' elitism: he is focusing not so much on the negative aspect of why metaphysics is or ought to be hidden, but on the positive reason why people need faith in the divine truths that are knowable through metaphysics: "lest large numbers of men should be left without knowledge of divine things, the way of faith has been provided...."⁴² The elitism is thus toned down, but not altogether denied. Aquinas would obviously not want to argue for Maimonides' *strict* elitism, namely, the idea that human perfection and union with God are reserved exclusively to an intellectual elite, because he believes that such union with God is achieved supernaturally through grace; hence mystical access to God is open to anyone independently of their rational proficiency. That is to say, Aquinas, unlike Maimonides, is opening up a path to perfection for all people. And in this respect I agree with McGinn: Aquinas' emphasis is quite the opposite of that of Maimonides. But Aquinas still defends the view that *rational* access to some of the truths of metaphysics, such as knowledge of God's attributes, is not open to common people,

42. I would like to thank one of my anonymous reviewers for making me aware of a possible misunderstanding here. I am *not* claiming that for Aquinas faith is meant to be a path for common people *only*, or that the metaphysician does not need faith to reach beatitude. These claims would be contrary to Aquinas' thought. As he himself states, "[I]n the case of certain divine truths, for a complete understanding of them the human mind in no way suffices... such is the truth of the Trinity and the unity of one God; and humans are led to knowledge of this, not in accordance with anything due their nature, but by divine grace alone. Therefore it is necessary that, for a perfection of knowledge of this kind, certain suppositions be proposed which must be believed at first, and from these one is directed into full cognition of those truths which at the outset one held on faith, even as in other sciences also... And suppositions of this sort are those that must be believed by all, since in this life they are neither known nor understood by, any one" (q. 3, a. 1, co.). Yet the point that I am making here is simply that whereas the metaphysician can access these truths through faith and through metaphysics, non-metaphysicians can only access them through faith. See also R. McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 2006).

but is reserved to an intellectual elite. Common people can only access divine truths through faith. And in this respect at least we can speak of a certain type of intellectual elitism present in Aquinas in his appropriation of his ‘five reasons’, even if it is an elitism in a looser sense than the one we find in Maimonides. Hence, his arguing for the need for faith is a way of moderating Maimonides’ elitism, but without eliminating it altogether.

C. Applications to Aquinas’ theology

Thus far Aquinas has argued that common people need faith as a way of accessing the ‘divine truths’ of metaphysics, because they are unable or unwilling to undergo the training necessary to reach those truths scientifically. He is not arguing or even presupposing—at least not yet—that this faith is based on an actual supernatural revelation from God. In fact, the argument thus far works even if we understand ‘faith’ in a human sense: common people can simply trust the ‘wise’ and have faith in what the wise have come to know scientifically about God. Thus, it could be argued that so far Aquinas’ argumentation has been kept within the sphere of philosophical reasoning, insofar as he has not yet introduced into his argument properly theological premises (that is, premises derived from Christian revelation). Even his claim that beatitude is the ultimate end of human beings can be understood in philosophical, Aristotelian terms.

Now, at this point of the discussion he clearly begins to steer the argument towards its theological applications: he now wishes to argue for the need for faith, not in metaphysical truths that most people have no access to except via faith (elsewhere called the preambles of faith), but in *revealed truths* that no one has access to other than *via* faith (the articles of faith).⁴³ The entire goal of Aquinas’ text on the five reasons for the need for faith is precisely to draw this conclusion, namely, that every human being needs faith in order to know the strictly revealed truths, the articles of faith.

43. Cf. *ST I*, q. 2, a. 2.

His argument consists essentially in an analogy. He begins the argument by recalling the fact that a beginner in the sciences, in order to make progress, must presuppose certain things at the beginning which will be later understood fully. That is, within the curriculum of studies, those who are at the beginning must have 'faith' in certain metaphysical truths that can only be fully understood once they reach metaphysics at the end. Just as Aquinas used this example to argue for the need for faith in metaphysical conclusions on the part of the common people, who cannot do metaphysics, now he will use it to argue for the need for faith in truths not knowable by reason on the part of absolutely all people, including metaphysicians, because there is no other way to access them until the future life.

But in the case of certain divine things, for a complete understanding of them the human mind in no way suffices, but full knowledge of them is to be awaited in that future life when there will be complete beatitude: such is the truth of the Trinity and the unity of one God; and man is led to knowledge of this, not in accordance with anything due his nature, but by divine grace alone. Therefore it is necessary that, for a perfection of knowledge of this kind, certain suppositions be proposed which must be believed at first, and from these one is directed into full cognition of those truths which at the outset he held on faith, even as in other sciences also, as has been said. Hence in Is. 7:9 it is said, according to one translation: "Unless you believed, you would not understand." And suppositions of this sort are those that must be believed by all, since in this life they are neither known nor understood by any one.⁴⁴

44. *Ibid.*: "Quaedam vero divinorum sunt, ad quae plene cognoscenda nullatenus ratio humana sufficit, sed eorum plena cognitio expectatur in futura vita, ubi erit plena beatitudo, sicut unitas et Trinitas unius Dei. Et ad hanc cognitionem homo perducetur non ex debito suae naturae, sed ex sola divina gratia. Unde oportet quod huius etiam perfectae scientiae quaedam suppositiones primo ei credendae proponantur, ex quibus dirigatur in plenam cognitionem eorum quae a principio credit, sicut et in aliis scientiis accidit, ut dictum est; et ideo dicitur Is. 7 secundum aliam litteram: nisi credideritis, non intelligetis. Et huiusmodi suppositiones sunt illa quae sunt credita quantum ad omnes et a nullo in hac vita scita vel intellecta."

Aquinas is here making a clever comparison between the belief in Christian revelation and pupils' belief in metaphysical conclusions. Just as pupils must have faith in some metaphysical truths in order to be able to advance in their course of studies, so all humans must have faith in some divine truths in order to be able to advance towards beatitude. Also, pupils do not yet scientifically know the truth of their metaphysical beliefs, so they must temporarily believe in order to be able to reach the point where they can scientifically know, through demonstration, what they previously believed. Similarly, humans do not yet strictly speaking know the truth of their belief in those things that transcend human reason, so they must temporarily believe in order to be able to reach the point where they can strictly know through the beatific vision.

Whatever the merits of this second, theological argument, it is important to stress that here Aquinas is no longer relying on Maimonides' 'five reasons' text. He used the text within its legitimate philosophical context. He now argued for his theological conclusion in a theological way, i.e., by introducing premises from Christian belief, namely that there are divine realities that cannot be known in this life except by revelation, that God has conveniently revealed at least some of them to humans, and that they will be more fully known in the next life. Hence, Aquinas may be reaching conclusions that the Maimonidean text does not warrant, but he is not relying exclusively on this text to argue for such conclusions.

CONCLUSION

I have presented a comparison between Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* 1.34 with Aquinas' *Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate* 3.1. In these texts each author gives 'five reasons', but seemingly for different things: Maimonides gives five reasons for why metaphysics should be hidden from common people, whereas Aquinas cites Maimonides as giving five reasons for the need for faith. I have disagreed with scholars who have claimed that here Aquinas is misappropriating Maimonides, or "standing Maimonides on his head," or that his use of Maimonides text is "reversal" of Maimonides' own thought. Based on

the context of each of the two passages, I have carefully argued that: (1) Maimonides does present his five reasons for hiding metaphysics as being also, albeit secondarily, *reasons why faith is necessary for common people*; that (2) Aquinas is citing the text legitimately and is simply offering a more moderate version of Maimonides' elitism, one that emphasizes its implications for the need for faith; and that (3) therefore, Aquinas' citation of Maimonides is not so much a reversal or misinterpretation as much as an appropriation of a philosophical text for Aquinas' own theological purposes, purposes which Aquinas seeks to accomplish through an argumentation that goes well beyond Maimonides' text. Aquinas is, in short, completing Maimonides' natural, rational mysticism with what he understands to be the supernatural perfection of the theological virtue of faith.